

Duxbury girl loses battle with blood disease

By Jason Pring
For The Patriot Ledger

Cradled in her mother's arms, and surrounded by the people who loved her most, Brittany Lambert lost her two-year battle with a rare blood disease Thursday afternoon in Children's Hospital.

On Friday, teachers and students at Duxbury Middle School pasted pictures and personal notes on her locker, as her family grieved at home and made funeral arrangements for the young would-be archaeologist who dreamed of excavating Egyptian ruins when she grew up.

"I don't think she ever believed that it would get to this point, therefore we never believed it," said her mother, Linda Haehnel. "If you don't have that hope, you can't get out of bed in the morning."

Brittany was diagnosed with myelodysplasia, a rare blood disorder that leads to a form of leukemia, in 1996. News of the disease soon spread among friends and neighbors, and the town of Duxbury rallied behind the Haehnel family and the girl who loved school, took dance lessons and showed promise as a young violinist.

Her only chance to fight the disease was a bone marrow transplant.

In August of 1996 more than 2,000 people braved a torrential downpour to get to Pilgrim Church and have their blood tested to see if they matched Brittany's bone marrow.

The first match fell through when the donor became ill; another donor surfaced and Brittany underwent transplant surgery in February of 1997, but the operation failed.

Doctors prescribed a combination of different medicines to keep the disease in remission. Her strength waned after steroids in her medication made her bones brittle, and she had to use a wheelchair.

"Her legs stiffened and she was in great deal of pain," said her stepfather, Jim Haehnel.



File photo

Brittany Lambert

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Brittany also developed pneumonia last winter, which weakened her further. But as spring came, she regained some of her strength and began attending classes at Duxbury Middle School.

Her mother said contact with friends after being isolated so long infused her with new strength and Brittany blossomed.

"She enjoyed it so much, just being around her friends," said Linda Haehnel. "Every one went out to their way to talk to her. She had quite a fan club."

By June, Brittany was strong enough to walk and celebrated her 13th birthday with family and friends clad in grass skirts, Hawaiian leis for a Duxbury-style luau.

Her condition worsened last Monday, her mother said.

"She was in a lot of distress, and was having a difficult time breathing," said Linda Haehnel, who took Brittany to Children's Hospital for treatment.

On Thursday, the family knew Brittany's battle was ending.

"We were able to spend 5½ hours with her," said her mother. "In the first hour she was conscious and

knew we were there then she went to sleep. They let me stay with her."

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